

TESTIMONY

of

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Committee on Government Reform  
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Mr. Chairman and Subcommittee members,

Thank you for convening this hearing on modern-day slavery and for giving me an opportunity to share with you our experience combating the trafficking networks in the United States.

I want to begin with a personal note of thanks. We work every day with women in the sex trafficking networks either through direct outreach to the brothels or through case work. We work with women who have been brutally abused, raped, and threatened with death – and who often, understandably, have little hope or trust. It means a tremendous amount to me to be able to say to them that my government cares about their situation - something that I know cannot be said in every country. Thank you again for demonstrating your commitment today to us and to all of the victims with whom we work.

Polaris Project is a multicultural, grassroots non-profit committed to combating sex trafficking. We are based in Washington, DC, and will be opening offices in the New York/New Jersey area and in Tokyo, Japan in the Fall of 2004. In the area of victim identification, we are considered one of the most innovative and aggressive agencies in the U.S., and are strong proponents of what we call the Proactive Approach.

In the DC area, we operate the Greater DC Task Force on Trafficking in Persons, working closely with law enforcement to identify trafficking operations in the sex industry. Our multicultural staff conduct direct outreach into brothel locations, providing information about our 24 hour Hotlines in Korean, Spanish, Thai, and English. In partnership with the Metropolitan Police of DC (MPDC), we operate a Sex Trafficking Assessment Team (STAT) that accompanies the MPDC Prostitution Unit on raids of brothels to conduct culturally-sensitive victim assessment.

Many people have little understanding of the enormity and the brutality of the sex trafficking industry in the United States. When they think of sex slavery, they think of Thailand or Nepal – not a suburban house outside of DC, with \$400,000 homes and manicured lawns, where two women were beaten, raped, and prostituted under the threat of death. Polaris Project's DC Task Force facilitated the escape of those two women, but there are many more women and children who have yet to be assisted. Polaris Project has a database of over 175 commercial sex operations at high risk

for trafficking within Korean, Latino, Chinese, and internal networks in the Greater DC area. And DC pales in comparison to the massive networks in New York, Los Angeles and elsewhere.

Some of the operations are based out of residential homes, many unknown to law enforcement, and advertised only through word of mouth to men of certain ethnic backgrounds. Others operate openly out of thinly veiled commercial front massage parlors, advertised out of publications like the Washington Post and Super Pages. These operations are located in suburbia and downtown business and government areas, and their customers include professionals and government workers. Within a one-mile radius of the White House alone, we are aware of twelve brothels in Korean and Latino networks at high risk for trafficking. Modern-day slavery could not be closer to home.

Our Victim Outreach Team has begun to break into the isolation of the networks, using outreach techniques designed in collaboration with survivors of the trafficking networks. But the efforts of NGO groups and the government have still barely scratched the surface, leaving the vast majority of the victims trapped under the control of their traffickers.

The standard I use to evaluate how well the US is doing against trafficking is “Have the traffickers noticed yet?” and particularly, “Have the victims noticed yet?” The answer, overwhelmingly, even almost half a decade after the passage of the TVPA, is no.

While there has been an increase in prosecutions, less than one percent of the estimated 17,000-20,000 international victims trafficked into the U.S. have been identified and assisted by the government, and almost half of those numbers came from a single case. If there is one statistic to remind us of how far we have to go, it is this one. If less than one percent of the victims of assault or rape were identified by the government, the American people would be outraged. We must understand why we are failing and how we must change our policies and practices to succeed.

Based on our experience in the field working with law enforcement, survivors, and service agencies to combat trafficking, I would like to share with you three areas where I believe we must improve.

1. Identifying the Victims of Trafficking

The U.S. Government has recognized that one of the largest obstacles to progress so far has been the identification of trafficking victims. Until we can find the victims of this underground industry, we cannot assist them or prosecute their traffickers. In our experience working with women in Korean, Latino, Chinese and other sex trafficking networks, women are almost wholly isolated - cut-off from contact with anyone except their traffickers, other victims, and the men who buy sex.

The primary strategy for victim identification that the federal government has adopted and funded is to encourage third-party reporting of cases by social service providers, local law enforcement, and the public. This approach, while a vital component, should not be the primary strategy because most victims cannot leave the brothels and rarely contact third parties.

Federal and local law enforcement have the responsibility to proactively investigate commercial sex operations that are similar to networks that have trafficked victims before. If customers and groups like us can find these locations, then certainly law enforcement can.

When Polaris Project obtains information on commercial sex operations that are at high risk for trafficking, federal law enforcement consistently informs us that they are unable to investigate unless more direct evidence for trafficking is obtained, such as first-hand testimony from the trafficking victim. Given the gravity of this crime and its importance to the US government, law enforcement should proactively verify that trafficking is not present at these locations. If there is smoke, we cannot afford to wait until people inside the burning building have verified that fire is present before we act. Unfortunately, this is what generally happens due to resource constraints at the federal level and prioritization of other crimes above modern-day slavery.

## 2. Combating Root Causes through Aggressive Prosecution

Trafficking in persons is the fastest growing criminal industry in the world for two primary reasons. First, traffickers face almost no risk of prosecution or penalties for their crimes. Second, traffickers can make large profits very quickly. Both causes can be addressed through aggressive enforcement at the federal and local level. People who are willing to exploit the most vulnerable of victims will not think twice if they believe they are more likely to get a parking ticket than to be prosecuted for

modern-day slavery. The men who buy sex through the traffickers will not stop adding to this criminal industry's coffers if they think there is little chance of accountability.

In the course of our work with sex trafficking networks, we have also found that traffickers are using techniques that amount to coercion and yet fall outside of the statutory language defining trafficking in persons. These practices include verbal intimidation, use of hierarchy within a cultural context, exploitation of the vulnerability of the trafficking victim. The statutory language must be broadened to recognize these more sophisticated, yet widespread, control techniques in order to facilitate prosecution of these cases.

The bottleneck that is constraining increased prosecution of traffickers is the resource constraints on federal law enforcement, the lack of state laws against trafficking, and the lack of enforcement of existing state laws related to trafficking. We must provide the necessary financial resources to increase investigation and prosecution capacity at the federal level and must modify or supplement statutory language to facilitate prosecution, adjusting to the changing methods of the traffickers.

### 3. Protecting and Serving All Victims

Recently, a girl shared her story with me about how since her early teen years she was forced to provide sex for men and endured beatings and rape by her trafficker. Remarkably enough, most law enforcement, when viewing her case, would not view it as human trafficking. Why? Because she is a citizen of the United States.

While the federal laws against trafficking equally protect foreign nationals and U.S. citizens, in practice, U.S. citizen victims are usually prosecuted as criminals, rather than protected as victims of a human rights abuse.

When I explained to this girl that laws such as the TVPA protects anyone under situations of modern-day slavery, she asked me why that law has not helped her and the thousands of other children like her. I did not have a very good answer for her.

The U.S. government has begun to face the problem of internal trafficking, as evidenced by the focus on this issue in the latest TIP Report. But we have largely failed to recognize the enormity of the issue within our own borders and provide an adequate response. In the DOJ *Assessment of U.S. Activities to Combat Trafficking in Persons* released earlier this year, the report almost ignored the internal trafficking of citizens in the U.S., except for a footnote that stated that it is estimated that over 200,000 American youth are trafficked into sexual exploitation. The footnote went on to say that this would not be the focus on their report. That shocking fact merits more than a footnote.

The US government must face the reality that hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizens are trafficked under brutal conditions within our own borders. An American who buys sex from a child in Thailand faces greater risk of prosecution and severe sentencing by U.S. authorities than if he buys sex from a child on K Street NW. We must protect the victims, prosecute the traffickers, and provide comprehensive and specialized services. Currently, the federal law does not provide funding for comprehensive and specialized services for internally trafficked victims – Congress must change the statutes to provide these vitally needed provisions.

If any country can crush the trafficking industry within its borders, it is the United States. Thank you for your continued work – your efforts have not and will not go unnoticed by those depend on your commitment – the victims themselves.